

# Doctoral Program Director Pro Tips

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GROUP FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF  
DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN SOCIAL WORK

# POLICIES & PROCEDURES

As program director, you will be inundated with questions about everything from program policies and procedural steps to budget balances and students' academic standing. Having answers on hand will work wonders for your sanity and longevity in the position. It will also engender a sense of confidence in you and in the integrity of the program as a whole. Everyone will benefit from program information that is clear, sensible, and accessible – in all respects – to everyone.

## TIP: Smooth the Transition

- If possible, co-direct the program for a period with the outgoing director so you can learn from watching and are not shouldering the entire weight of the program from the start.
- Ask the previous director for timelines (e.g., what is supposed to happen when), decision flowcharts (what are the processes and steps), instructions (how to use databases), thorough “case reports” on each student (strengths/weaknesses, upcoming milestones, funding), introductions to key players and personnel (reliable resources in other administrative units, etc.), and a tour of program archives/materials/systems.
- Also take time to listen to the previous director's perspective on the program's standing, how they tried to steer the program, and what they see on the horizon. There may be important perspective and wisdom to glean.

## TIP: Read, Update, & Simplify the Handbook

- Read your program handbook carefully. Your fresh eyes as a new director are an asset. Give particular attention to parts that confuse you, since these likely trip up others, too, and are ripe for revision. Handbooks tend to lengthen as they age, and this can make them convoluted, full of conflicting information, and hard to use (leading people to email you instead of looking for themselves!). Expect to spend time reorganizing and distilling at least some parts of it.
  - + BONUS: Cleaning up trouble spots is unlikely to meet any resistance and is an easy way to earn colleagues' and students' goodwill.
- To minimize length and avoid conflicting versions, hyperlink to other sources. For example, if your program follows campus-level policies regarding plagiarism, state that and link to the relevant website.
- Update the handbook (including links) every August before the new academic year.

## TIP: Keep Calendars, Keep Track, & Keep in Touch

- Create or update a calendar of important program/university deadlines and events. Set automatic email alerts to go out when critical dates are approaching.
- Maintain a database that includes each student's date of entry, when they meet program benchmarks, advisor/committee members, assistantships, awards, and critical incidents or conversations.
- Open communication channels with students, faculty, and staff: weekly program announcements (e.g., calls for papers or funding proposals, lectures, notices about student achievements); periodic meetings with student group leaders; regular “coffee-with-the-director” sessions, etc. Be generous with public congratulations and thanks.

# RECRUITMENT & ADMISSIONS

Recruitment is a large part of doctoral program direction. As more programs are started (including DSW and online options), competition for applicants is increasing. Recruitment is most critical at smaller, newer programs and those not at destination campuses. It can also be more difficult in less populous areas or in those with multiple nearby programs.

## TIP: Tailor Recruitment Strategies & Admissions Materials

- Identify your strengths and focus on conveying those. Are you at a high-prestige campus? Are your faculty members renowned scholars? Do you have specializations in particular areas? Are you able to offer unusually generous financial assistance? Do you have an especially collegial environment?
- Recruiting strategies depend on the nature of your targets:
  - + Will you be focusing primarily on local residents, or do you hope to attract national or international applicants?
  - + Will you rely on in-person or virtual info sessions?
  - + Will your outreach efforts target practitioners? Current MSW students?
  - + What modes of advertising will be most effective: Print/paid ads? Email/listserv announcements? Social media? Word of mouth?
- To recruit students who are diverse (in various ways), consider how you can not only attract but also support them in tangible and intangible ways throughout their studies.
- Tailor your application process to reflect your program's culture and priorities (e.g., requiring an interview, using special/unusual essay prompts).

## TIP: Access matters

- Develop clear materials, especially regarding funding, coursework, and expectations.  
*^ to someone not already swimming in academia...don't expect applicants to know what an assistantship, tuition waiver, or even a dissertation is!*
- Reply personally to inquiries and make introductions to potential faculty advisors and current students. Help your colleagues understand that recruitment = advertising for the entire school. Put your best, friendliest, most encouraging foot forward.
- Facilitate visits to campus if you have the resources... or maybe a virtual tour, if you don't.

## GOOD FORM: Observe the "April 15 Resolution"

- Almost all GADE members are signatories to a Council of Graduate Schools resolution stating that applicants have until April 15 of each year to accept or decline an offer of financial support. Therefore, in most cases you will be acting against your University's policies if you push prospective students (with a funding offer) to make an earlier decision. Consider noting this in offer letters so that applicants are aware of their rights.
  - + Sample language (from University at Buffalo SSW): *Like our peer institutions, we honor the [Council of Graduate Schools Resolution](#) that all graduate school applicants have until April 15 to make a decision regarding enrollment.*

# STUDENT & PROGRAM FOSTERING PROGRESS

## TIP: Maximize Annual Reviews

Most schools require an annual review of a student's progress. Consider revising your process so it is more than a formality or checklist of completed courses and requirements.

- Include questions to prompt constructive feedback and potentially sensitive conversations (e.g., alignment of advisor/advisee styles and expectations, student's career plans).
- Substantive area advisors sometimes overlook professional development issues. As part of their annual reviews, ask students to articulate their research program (as in a cover letter) and to submit a CV. Advisors should then help hone these as part of the review.
- Reviews are often conducted by a student's advisor/chair. These may include the program director, or the director may meet individually with each student. In some programs, the entire doctoral program committee discusses each student's progress.

## TIP: Teach Mentoring

- Mentoring doesn't come naturally to everyone, and some faculty need to learn how to do it successfully. See the resources in the GADE Starter Kit on the [GADE website](#).
- Students, too, may need help learning how to work with a mentor. A good resource is the University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School's [guide for graduate students](#).
- Encourage multiple and diverse mentoring relationships based on substantive areas or similar life circumstances, as well as with faculty from other disciplines or institutions.

## TIP: Increase Traffic

Doctoral programs can feel removed from the rest of a school. Faculty who don't teach doctoral courses may not know the students or program well. Staff/faculty may wonder (resent?) that so many resources are spent on a small program. Students may only hear from the same few faculty, missing out on diverse views and paths. Possible steps to counter this include:

- Host school-wide events. These can be substantive (e.g., lunch-and-learn sessions, panel discussions) or festive (e.g., defense celebrations, ice cream socials, potlucks). Focus on making the program an enriching, enjoyable, and shared part of the school community.
- Engage as many faculty as possible. Those who don't teach doctoral courses may still be valuable guest speakers, advisors/chairs, or members of doctoral program committees.
- Organize professional development sessions (CV or job market clinics, sessions on publishing or grantwriting, teaching workshops, etc.). Feature program alum, faculty who are not already formally engaged in the program, or faculty from related disciplines to expose students to more ideas, experiences, and "tricks of the trade."

## TIP: Take the Program's Temperature

- Every year (right after you give them ice cream), conduct a brief program evaluation. Use the survey to ask what parts of the program are working well, improving, and still need work. This will give you valuable information when it comes time for your comprehensive program evaluation. Earn goodwill by using the data to set program priorities. Students and colleagues will appreciate having input and you will know that you are picking win-able battles (and which will require more time and political capital).

# SELF-CARE FOR ADMINISTRATORS

## TIP: Absorb the Shock, Embrace the Service, Negotiate for Yourself

We all enter the role of program director amid complex circumstances. Some people will welcome you, others may doubt you, a couple might resent you, and more than a few might pity you. You may worry about losing research momentum. You may feel unprepared.

- Structure your calendar and personal expectations to allow yourself time to adjust to the role and to get to know the program and people in it.
- Consider how you will be most effective on behalf of the students, the program, and your institution. Your style, personality, and views will shape how you play the part of director.
- Recognize service as an honor and an important responsibility. Savor the opportunity to play such a crucial role in others' careers and in advancing social work research.
- Don't discount what makes you good and happy at your job (e.g., research). Model for students how to balance service to others and pursuit of individual goals. Like teaching, program administration will take up as much space as you allow. Keep it confined.
- Negotiate for what you need to do the job: course release, salary, staff, space, title, etc. Ask for program administration to count for more than usual in your merit evaluations.

## TIP: Transfer Your Skills

As scholars, we have research agendas that we advance strategically: balancing what's desirable with what's feasible as we design a new project; staggering and staging projects so that our research "pipelines" flow steadily and sanely; and collecting/analyzing/learning from data to decide what step to take next. All of this transfers to program administration.

- Just as you have a research agenda and pipeline, develop a program vision and triage projects/initiatives.
- Conduct a needs assessment of various stakeholders to sort through what works about the program (and for whom) and what needs fixing.
- Use collaborators and key informants. You may be program director, but you don't need to do it all. You also might not be very good at parts of it (we aren't all expert statisticians or gifted writers, either). Get help and insight from others.
- Say no. There will be many challenges to address and improvements to be made. Use your judgment to decide which to tackle and which to leave for another time or person.

## TIP: Use GADE / Contribute to GADE

- The GADE guidelines, directors' survey, and listserv are vital resources. Use them to educate others about best practices and emerging trends in doctoral education and to advocate for needed resources or changes for students, the program, or yourself.
  - GADE's survey of program directors (conducted every  $\approx 2$  years) is especially useful in negotiating for compensation since you can report what other schools provide.
  - These resources (especially the listserv and directors' survey) are only as useful as their contributors. Share information candidly and freely, and everyone will be better for it.
- + **Yes, we are competing for the same students, who then may compete for the same jobs. But remember, too, that we're all working with a shared purpose: to advance social justice through social work research.**